

INTRODUCTION: THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

The aim of this book is to provide a map of the development of the study of popular culture across the field of cultural theory from the postdisciplinary perspective of cultural studies. It is, of course, difficult to draw a clear borderline between the study of popular culture in cultural studies and, say, the study of popular culture in historical studies, literary studies, anthropology or sociology. Some of the readings included here might, for example, just as easily be found in a book called *History and Popular Culture: A Reader*. However, although the borderline might be difficult to draw, it does exist. Perhaps the best way to register this difference is to describe the history and the assumptions of cultural studies.

What Is (British) Cultural Studies?'

Although it is possible to point to degree programmes, to journals, to conferences and associations, there is no simple answer to this question. The first problem any attempt at definition encounters is whether or not cultural studies is simply the study of contemporary culture. Richard Johnson (1996), for example, describes cultural studies as 'a process, a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge; codify it and you might halt its reaction' (p. 75). However, it has recently become increasingly fashionable for the term 'cultural studies' to be used to describe any approach to the study of culture. At the risk of seeming sectarian (and out of step with the postdisciplinary aims and spirit of cultural studies), I find it very difficult to accept this usage. I think there is a difference between cultural studies and other ways to study culture ('culture studies' or the 'sociology of culture', for example).

Traditionally, an academic field of inquiry is defined by three criteria: first, there is the object of study; second, there is the method of approach to the object of study; third, there is the history of the field of enquiry itself. Although there is little difficulty in addressing the first and third criteria (which I shall do shortly), the second does create a problem. The problem is this: cultural studies has never had one distinct method of approach to its object of study. Therefore, in order to avoid difficulties I cannot possibly deal with here, I intend to substitute 'basic assumptions' for methodology.

John Fiske (1996) maintains that 'culture' in cultural studies 'is neither aesthetic nor humanist in emphasis, but political' (p. 115). What he means by this is that the object of study in cultural studies is not culture defined in a narrow sense, as the objects of supposed aesthetic excellence ('high art'); nor, in an equally narrow sense, as a process of aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual development; but culture understood, in Raymond Williams's (Reading 4) phrase, as 'a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group'. This is a definition of culture that can embrace the first two definitions, but also, and crucially, it can range beyond the social exclusivity and narrowness of these, to include popular culture – the cultures of everyday life. Therefore, although cultural studies cannot (and should not) be reduced to the study of popular culture, it is certainly the case that the study of popular culture is central to the project of cultural studies. As Cary Nelson (1996) explains, 'people with ingrained contempt for popular culture will never fully understand the cultural studies project' (p. 279).

When asked to say what is distinctive about the cultural studies perspective, Stuart Hall (1996c) responded, 'I think the question of the politics of culture or the culture of politics is somewhere close to . . . what is at the centre of cultural studies' (p. 396). Cultural studies regards culture as political in another quite specific sense, one that reveals the dominant political position in cultural studies. Here is part of the conclusion to Hall's essay 'Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular"' (Reading 43):

Popular culture . . . is an arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture already fully formed – might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters.

Others working in cultural studies might not express their attitude to popular culture quite in these terms, but they would certainly share Hall's concern to think culture politically.

All the basic assumptions of British cultural studies are Marxist. This is not to say that all practitioners of cultural studies are Marxists, but that cultural studies is itself grounded in Marxism. All its major texts are informed, one way or another, by Marxism, whether or not their authors regard themselves as Marxist, post-Marxist or rhetorical Marxists (using the rhetoric, vocabulary, models, etc., without, necessarily, a commitment to the politics). The rest of this introduction is written with the assumption that British cultural studies is post-Marxist (see Reading 17).

Marxism informs cultural studies in two basic ways. First, to understand the meaning(s) of culture we must analyse it in relation to the social structure and its history. Although it is constituted (made possible) by a particular social structure with a specific history, it is not studied as a reflection of this structure and history. On the contrary, cultural studies argues that culture's importance derives from the fact that it helps to constitute the structure and shape the history. Second, cultural studies assumes that capitalist industrial societies are societies divided unequally along, for example, ethnic, gender and class lines. It is argued that culture is one of the principal sites where these divisions are established and contested: culture is a terrain on which there takes

place a continual struggle over meaning(s), in which subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings that bear the interests of dominant groups. As Tony Bennett (1996) explains, cultural studies is committed 'to examining cultural practices from the point of view of their intrication with, and within, relations of power' (p. 307). It is this that makes culture ideological. Ideology is the central concept in cultural studies. James Carey (1996) even suggests that 'British cultural studies could be described just as easily and perhaps more accurately as ideological studies' (p. 65).

There are many competing definitions of ideology, but it is the formulation established by Hall (Reading 16) in the early 1980s that is generally accepted as the dominant working definition in cultural studies: 'By ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.' Working from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony (see Readings 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 43), Hall developed a theory of 'articulation' to explain the processes of ideological struggle (Hall's use of 'articulation' plays on the term's double meaning: to express and to join together). He argues that texts and practices are not inscribed with meaning, guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of production; meaning is always the result of an act of 'articulation'. The process is called 'articulation' because meaning has to be expressed, but it is always expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse(s). Thus expression is always connected (articulated) to and conditioned by context.

Hall's formulation also draws on the work of the Russian theorist Valentin Vološinov (1973). Vološinov argues that meaning is determined by the social context in which it is articulated.² Texts and practices are 'multi-accentual'; that is, they can be articulated with different 'accents' by different people in different contexts for different politics. A text or practice or event is not the issuing source of meaning, but a site where the articulation of meaning – variable meaning(s) – can take place. And because different meanings can be ascribed to the same text or practice or event, meaning is always a potential site of conflict. When, for example, a radical rap group use the word 'nigger' to attack an embedded institutional racism, it is articulated with an 'accent' very different from the 'accent' given the word in, say, the Neanderthal ramblings of a neo-Nazi. This, of course, is not simply a question of linguistic struggle – a conflict over semantics – but a sign of political struggle about who can claim the power and the authority to define social reality. As Hall (Reading 43) explains,

The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. This year's radical symbol or slogan will be neutralized into next year's fashion; the year after, it will be the object of a profound cultural nostalgia.

The cultural field is defined by this struggle to articulate, disarticulate and rearticulate cultural texts and practices for particular ideologies, particular politics. Hall (Reading 16) contends that 'meaning is always a social production, a practice. The world has to

be *made to mean*.' A key question for cultural studies is: Why do particular meanings get regularly constructed around particular cultural texts and practices and achieve the status of 'common sense', acquire a certain taken-for-granted quality? However, although it recognizes that the culture industries are a major site of ideological production, constructing powerful images, descriptions, definitions, frames of reference for understanding the world, cultural studies rejects the view that 'ordinary' people who consume these productions are cultural dupes, victims of 'an up-dated form of the opium of the people'. As Hall (Reading 43) insists:

That judgement may make us feel right, decent and self-satisfied about our denunciations of the agents of mass manipulation and deception – the capitalist cultural industries: but I don't know that it is a view which can survive for long as an adequate account of cultural relationships; and even less as a socialist perspective on the culture and nature of the working class. Ultimately, the notion of the people as a purely passive, outline force is a deeply unsocialist perspective.

In contrast, for Hall the field of culture is a major site of ideological struggle: a terrain of 'incorporation' and 'resistance', one of the sites where hegemony is to be won or lost. The consumption of texts and practices – or 'secondary production', as Michel de Certeau (Reading 46) calls it – is therefore always, at some level, the articulation and activation of meaning. As Fiske (1989a) points out: 'If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. They will not be *made* popular' (p. 8). But as he also makes clear: 'Popular culture is made by subordinate peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant' (p. 8).

Post-Marxist cultural studies insists that there is always a dialogue between the processes of production and the activities of consumption. The consumer always confronts a text or practice in its material existence as a result of determinate conditions of production. But in the same way, the text or practice is confronted by a consumer who in effect 'produces in use' the range of possible meaning(s) – these cannot just be read off from the materiality of the text or practice, or the means or relations of its production.

There are different ways of thinking, different ways of using, what Hall (Reading 16) calls 'the enormously productive metaphor of hegemony'. Hegemony theory in cultural studies operates not always quite as formulated by Gramsci. The concept has been expanded and elaborated to take into account other areas of struggle. Whereas for Gramsci the concept is used to explain and explore relations of power articulated in terms of class, recent formulations in cultural studies have extended the concept to include, for example, gender, 'race', ethnicity, disability, generation, sexuality. What has remained constant (or relatively constant under the impact of political and theoretical change, from left-Leavisism to postmodernism and post-colonialism) is a particular guiding principle of cultural analysis. It is first found in what Michael Green (1996) quite rightly calls Hoggart's 'remarkably enduring formulation' (p. 52): 'Against this background may be seen how much the more generally diffused appeals of the mass publications

connect with commonly accepted attitudes, *how they are altering those attitudes and how they are meeting resistance*' (Hoggart, 1990, p. 17; my italics). In the 1960s it is given a culturalist accent by Hall and Whannel (Reading 6), 'Teenage culture is a contradictory mixture of the authentic and the manufactured: it is *an area of self-expression for the young and a lush grazing pasture for the commercial providers*' (my italics). In the 1970s it is found in the Gramscian tones of John Clarke et al. (1976):

Men and women are . . . *formed, and form themselves* through society, culture and history. So the existing cultural patterns form a sort of historical reservoir – a preconstituted 'field of possibilities' – which groups take up, transform, develop. Each group *makes something of its starting conditions* – and through this 'making', through this practice, culture is reproduced and transmitted (p. 11; my italics).

In the 1980s we hear it in the Foucauldian analysis of Mica Nava (1987): 'Consumerism is far more than just economic activity: it is also about dream and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity. . . . Consumerism is a discourse through which *disciplinary power is both exercised and contested*' (pp. 209–10; my italics). In the 1990s it is there in Marie Gillespie's (1995) account of the relationship between media consumption and the cultures of migrant and diasporic communities, demonstrating how young Punjabi Londoners are '*shaped by but at the same time reshaping the images and meanings* circulated in the media' (p. 2; my italics) – what she calls 're-creative consumption'. In every decade in the history of cultural studies the point has been made and repeated. It is the 'Gramscian insistence' (before, with and after Gramsci), learned from Marx (1977), that we make culture and we are made by culture; there is agency and there is structure. It is not enough to celebrate agency, nor is it enough to detail the structure(s) of power; we must always keep in mind the dialectical play between resistance and incorporation. The best of cultural studies has always been mindful of this.

There are those, within and outside cultural studies, who believe that Hall's model of ideological struggle has led to an uncritical celebration of popular culture: 'resistance' is endlessly elaborated in terms of empowerment and pleasure, while 'incorporation' is quietly forgotten. Nicholas Garnham (see Reading 54) argues that to reverse this trend requires a 'return' to the procedures of political economy. Lawrence Grossberg (Reading 55) offers a response to Garnham's argument. Jim McGuigan (Reading 53) contends that the work of John Fiske (see Reading 48) has reduced the study of popular culture in cultural studies to an uncritical celebration of the 'popular' reading. The work of Paul Willis (see Reading 50) and that of Ien Ang (see Readings 18 and 49) are also cited as examples of this uncritical drift. From different perspectives, both Michael Schudson (Reading 47) and Duncan Webster (Reading 51) provide overviews of some of the issues involved in the debate between what might be called 'cultural populism' and 'cultural pessimism'. My own view (and I draw attention to it because it has almost certainly informed the selection of the 55 readings collected here in this book) is that people *make* popular culture from the repertoire of commodities supplied by the culture industries (film, television, music, publishing, sporting, etc.). I also believe that making popular culture ('production in use') can be empowering

to subordinate and resistant to dominant understandings of the world. But this is not to say that it is always empowering and resistant. To deny that the consumers of popular culture are cultural dupes is not to deny that the culture industries seek to manipulate; but it is to deny that popular culture is little more than a degraded landscape of commercial and ideological manipulation, imposed from above in order to make profit and secure ideological control. To decide these matters requires vigilance and attention to the details of the production, distribution and consumption of culture. These are not matters that can be decided once and for all (outside the contingencies of history and politics) with an elitist glance and a condescending sneer. Nor can they be read off from the moment of production (locating meaning, pleasure, ideological effect, etc., in, variously, the intention, the means of production or the production itself); these are only aspects of the contexts for 'production in use', and it is, ultimately, in 'production in use' that questions of meaning, pleasure, ideological effect and so on can be (contingently) decided.

Whatever else cultural studies is, it is certainly not the monolithic unity conjured up by critics such as McGuigan and Garnham. Cultural studies has always been an unfolding discourse, responding to changing historical and political conditions and always marked by debate, disagreement and intervention. Hall (1992) makes this very clear:

Cultural Studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories. It is a whole set of formations; it has its own different conjunctures and moments in the past. It included many different kinds of work. I want to insist on that! It always was a set of unstable formations. It was 'centred' only in quotation marks. . . . It had many trajectories; many people had and have different theoretical positions, all of them in contention (p. 272).

For example, the centrality of class in cultural studies was disrupted first by feminism's insistence on the importance of gender and sexuality, and then by black students raising questions about the invisibility of race in much cultural studies analysis. Similarly, there can be no doubt that in recent years cultural studies has been radically transformed as debates about postmodernism and postmodernity have threatened to replace the more familiar debates about ideology and hegemony.

According to Hall's (1980b) influential account of the formation and development of cultural studies, the key point to understand is that 'there are no "absolute beginnings" and few unbroken continuities. . . . What is important are the significant breaks – where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes' (p. 31). Hall charts the formation of British cultural studies around three 'significant breaks'. First, there is the break with Leavisism and mechanistic forms of Marxism, which results in the birth of culturalism (late 1950s/early 1960s). Then, there is the encounter with French structuralism and post-structuralism (1960s/early 1970s). Finally, there is the discovery of the work of Gramsci and the concept of hegemony (mid 1970s), enabling a synthesis of the best of culturalism and structuralism. It is at this moment that the post-disciplinary approach to contemporary culture – now known internationally as British cultural studies – is born. British cultural studies continues to be Gramscian in its

critical focus, but debates in and about postmodernism have increasingly threatened to dislodge its prominence. Whether this challenge has produced a 'paradigm crisis' is not yet clear. Some of the readings collected here, especially in Parts 6 and 7, directly and indirectly address this question.

About This Book

The 55 readings gathered here collectively map the development of the study of popular culture in cultural studies. Although I have grouped them in seven parts to suggest a certain chronology of development, I am aware that the story of cultural studies (or, for that matter, the story of the study of popular culture from the perspective of cultural studies) cannot be easily told within a linear narrative. There are many moments of overlap, many occasions when the story turns back on itself to reconsider and sometimes reactivate what had seemed dead and gone. The upshot of this is that some readings might have been situated in more than one part; and, moreover, that some readings sit very uncomfortably in only one part. Having said this, the book is organized 'chronologically' into seven parts. Each part marks a particular moment in the history of the study of popular culture in cultural studies. Part One contains work from the 'prehistory' of the study of popular culture in cultural studies. This is the approach known as the 'culture and civilization' tradition. The next five parts contain examples of work from the approaches of culturalism, Marxism, post-Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism. Although feminism and Marxism have their own separate parts, so central have been these approaches to the elaboration of cultural studies that examples of them appear in many of the other parts as well. The final part addresses recent debates around 'the politics of the popular' – questions of value, meaning, ideology, pessimism, populism and pleasure.

Readers always tell particular stories, establish narrative paths through a field of study. This Reader is no different. Readers are also classic examples of the play of 'intertextuality': they tell stories intended by an author, but are inscribed with, constantly pushed and jostled by, other stories, other authors. In this Reader I have tried to draw a particular route through the development of the study of popular culture in cultural studies. I am aware that there are other ways to tell this story, and that at specific stages in my own telling some of these other ways demand the greater attention. I am also aware that although you may recognize the general features of the map this Reader offers, you may not at times feel entirely satisfied with the details. Other Readers (with other details) will tell it differently. When one is making a Reader, it is not always possible to tell exactly the story first intended. For a variety of reasons (financial constraints and non-availability of material, etc.), one cannot always reproduce the details of the narrative one would have liked. But having said that, I am happy with what I have been able to reproduce. I might have related it differently, but I stand by the telling I have told. My hope is that you will find it as pleasurable and as useful to read as I have found it useful and pleasurable to tell.